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Governance Fragmentation and Organized Crime in China: Collective Efficacy, Criminal Embeddedness, and Grassroots Control

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Abstract: This study examines governance-related patterns reflected in prosecuted organized crime cases within a municipal jurisdiction in China during the nationwide anti-gang campaign. Drawing on 95 finalized criminal judgments collected from China Judgments Online, the study analyzes governance fragmentation, collective efficacy, organizational persistence, and governance infiltration in judicially processed organized crime cases. The judicial documents were manually coded according to governance-related variables informed by criminological theory, and intercoder reliability was assessed using percent agreement and Cohen's kappa. The findings show that organized criminal groups frequently appeared in jurisdictions characterized by weaker informal social control, fragmented governance coordination, and limited public participation. Longer organizational persistence also appeared to be associated with higher levels of criminal activity and greater local embeddedness. The analysis further suggests that campaign-style anti-gang enforcement may produce visible short-term enforcement outcomes while remaining associated with broader structural governance limitations. Because court judgments represent selectively detected and prosecuted cases, the findings are interpreted as descriptive associations rather than causal relationships. The article contributes to organized-crime research and Asian criminology by showing how grassroots organized crime in China may become embedded in local social relations, grassroots political structures, and overlapping formal and informal mechanisms of social control.

Keywords: Organized Crime, Grassroots Governance, Collective Efficacy, Social Disorganization, Criminal Embeddedness, Asian Criminology, Formal-Informal Social Control

Data Availability Statement : The judicial documents analyzed in this study were collected from China Judgments Online. Because online availability may change due to publication and access restrictions, the coded materials are

available from the author upon reasonable request for non-commercial research purposes, subject to applicable legal and ethical restrictions.

Ethics Committee Approval : This study used publicly available judicial documents and did not involve direct interaction with human participants. Ethics approval was therefore not required for the present document-based secondary analysis under the applicable institutional and data-use conditions.

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Introduction

The relationship between governance capacity and organized crime has become an increasingly important issue in contemporary criminology. Existing studies have shown that organized crime often emerges and persists in contexts characterized by weak institutional control, fragmented governance structures, limited public participation, and declining trust in formal authority (Arias, 2017; Lessing, 2021; Skaperdas, 2001; Tilly, 1985). Rather than functioning solely as external criminal organizations, organized criminal groups may become embedded in local social structures and develop informal governance functions within communities. International criminological research has increasingly emphasized the relationship between organized crime, informal governance, and weakened institutional control (Albini, 1971; Block & Chambliss, 1981; Finckenauer, 2005; Gambetta, 1993; Paoli, 2003; Reuter, 1983; Varese, 2011; von Lampe, 2016).

While organized crime has been extensively studied in Western criminological literature, less is known about how grassroots governance shapes organized crime in non-Western settings, particularly in China. Comparative and Asian criminology scholarship cautions against treating Western theories as portable templates that can be applied without attention to Asian institutions, social relations, and forms of crime control (Liu, 2007, 2009, 2017, 2021, 2022, 2024; Liu et al., 2013; Messner, 2015; Yu & Liu, 2024). Existing Chinese-language scholarship has often emphasized governance modernization, campaign-style enforcement, and social stability. Less work has connected these governance concerns to criminological theories of social disorganization, collective efficacy, criminal embeddedness, and formal–informal social control.

This study addresses this gap by examining organized crime at the grassroots level in China through the analysis of court judgments issued during the nationwide anti-gang campaign launched in 2018. Drawing on 95 finalized criminal judgments involving gang-related cases, “evil force” cases, and other criminal-group cases, the research investigates how organized criminal activity is described in judgments involving weaknesses in grassroots governance.

This design is useful for tracing how judicial narratives describe the intersection of criminal organization, local authority, and community regulation, but it does not estimate the full prevalence of organized crime or identify causal effects.

The study suggests that grassroots organized crime may be understood not only as a criminal justice issue, but also as a governance-related phenomenon associated with fragmented governance structures and weakened informal social control. Specifically, the findings suggest that greater levels of organized criminal embeddedness were more frequently reflected in judicial cases characterized by weaker legal authority and inconsistent law enforcement, lower levels of public participation and weakened collective efficacy, unresolved social conflicts and unequal interest distribution, and less effective rapid-response governance mechanisms.

The research contributes to criminological scholarship in three ways. First, it offers a context-sensitive extension of social disorganization and collective efficacy theories by examining how informal social control operates within Chinese grassroots governance rather than within the Western urban-neighborhood settings where these theories were first developed. Second, it contributes to Asian criminology by showing that organized crime's local embeddedness in China involves not only weakened community regulation but also local social relations, grassroots political authority, and the overlap between formal and informal control mechanisms. Third, it contributes to governance-oriented organized-crime research by using court judgments to identify descriptive patterns in prosecuted cases while keeping the limits of judicial-document data explicit.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. The next section clarifies key concepts and situates the study within criminological theory. The article then explains the data source, coding procedures, and methodological approach, followed by an empirical analysis of governance-related patterns reflected in the judicial documents. The final sections discuss the criminological implications of the findings and conclude with broader reflections on grassroots governance and organized crime in China.

Conceptual Clarification

Several concepts used in Chinese policy and legal discourse require clarification for an international readership.

Organized Crime

In international criminology, organized crime generally refers to relatively stable criminal groups that engage in coordinated illegal activities for economic or political gain through violence, intimidation, corruption, or informal governance. Research on organized crime also emphasizes the diversity and structural adaptability of criminal organizations across different governance and social environments (Finckenauer, 2005; Paoli, 2002; von Lampe, 2016). International criminological research further suggests that organized criminal organizations may develop embedded relationships with local political, economic, and social structures while exercising forms of informal protection and extra-legal authority (Gambetta, 1993; Paoli, 2003; Skaperdas, 2001; Tilly, 1985; Varese, 2011; von Lampe, 2016).

China-focused organized-crime research adds that criminal embeddedness may operate through political-criminal connections, extra-legal protection, and relations between local authority, business interests, and criminal groups (Chin & Godson, 2006; Ong, 2018; Wang, 2017). This article therefore treats organized crime not only as coordinated criminal activity, but also as a possible form of informal authority within local governance environments.

Gang-Related Crime

In the Chinese legal context, “gang-related crime” generally refers to criminal organizations characterized by relatively stable organizational structures and coordinated illegal activities with significant social influence.Compared with the broader international criminological understanding of organized crime, the Chinese legal definition places emphasis on organizational hierarchy, continuity, and the capacity to exert sustained social influence within local communities.

Evil Forces

The term “Evil Forces” is a China-specific campaign-based legal and policy category used during anti-gang governance campaigns. It generally refers to smaller-scale criminal groups that engage in repeated coercive, disruptive, or violent activities but do not fully satisfy the legal criteria for organized criminal organizations.

Because this category does not directly correspond to established criminological concepts used internationally, this article treats “evil forces” as a Chinese legal-policy classification rather than as an analytically universal criminological category.

This caution is important because recent research on China’s “sweep away black societies and eradicate evil forces” campaign shows that the category is linked to centralized enforcement, early intervention, and campaign-style mobilization rather than to a stable international criminological classification (Biddulph, 2015; Liebman, 2014; Minzner, 2011; Trevaskes, 2010; Yin & Mou, 2023).

Grassroots Governance

Grassroots governance in this study refers to governance processes occurring at the township, village, and urban community levels involving local governments, community organizations, residents, and informal community actors.

Rather than treating governance solely as state administration, this article adopts a broader criminological understanding emphasizing governance capacity, informal social control, public participation, and state–society interaction (Black, 1976; Garland, 2001; Huntington, 1968; Mann, 1986). This broader understanding is consistent with criminological research on governance capacity, collective efficacy, and community-level crime regulation. It is also consistent with Asian social-control scholarship, which emphasizes that crime control in Asian societies often involves a shifting balance among formal state agencies, community organizations, and informal social-control mechanisms (Jiang et al., 2014; Zhong & Zhang, 2021).

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Organized Crime and Local Governance

Research on organized crime increasingly emphasizes the embedded relationship between criminal organizations and local governance structures. Rather than operating entirely outside society, organized criminal groups may become integrated into local economic networks, political systems, and informal social relations. International criminological research has emphasized that organized criminal groups frequently develop embedded relationships with local political, economic, and social structures rather than operating entirely outside formal governance systems (Arias, 2017; Enniss & Guiora, 2010; Gambetta, 1993; Kleemans & van de Bunt, 1999;

Lessing, 2021; Paoli, 2003; Varese, 2011; von Lampe, 2016). Studies of criminal governance further suggest that organized criminal organizations may exercise forms of informal authority, protection, and dispute resolution in areas characterized by weak institutional control or fragmented governance capacity.

For the present study, the key issue is not only whether organized criminal groups operate inside a community. It is how they become locally credible and durable. China-focused research shows that criminal authority may be sustained through protection, corruption, political-criminal connections, and informal access to local resources (Chin & Godson, 2006; Kleemans & van de Bunt, 1999; Ong, 2018; Skaperdas, 2001; Wang, 2017). These mechanisms help connect general theories of criminal governance to the specific problem of grassroots governance in China.

Social Disorganization Theory

Social disorganization theory provides an important framework for understanding the relationship between governance deficits and organized crime. Classical social disorganization theory, developed by Shaw and McKay (1942), argues that weakened community institutions, residential instability, and declining informal social control increase the likelihood of criminal activity. Subsequent criminological research further emphasizes the importance of neighborhood-level social regulation and collective social organization in crime prevention.

Although originally developed in urban criminology, the theory is useful for understanding how grassroots governance fragmentation contributes to organized criminal activity in local Chinese communities. Weak organizational coordination, declining trust, governance fragmentation, and unresolved social conflicts reduce communities' capacity to regulate behavior collectively.

This article therefore uses social disorganization theory as a starting point, not as a complete explanation. Asian criminology asks how concepts developed in Western settings should be extended when local order is mediated by grassroots institutions, political authority, kinship, and local economic interests (Liu, 2007, 2017, 2021, 2024; Messner, 2015). The theoretical question is not whether Chinese cases "fit" Western theory exactly, but which parts of the theory require specification in a different institutional setting.

Collective Efficacy and Informal Social Control

Collective efficacy theory, developed by Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls (1997), emphasizes the importance of social trust, social cohesion, and residents' willingness to intervene for the common good. Communities characterized by weakened collective efficacy often experience reduced informal social control and increased opportunities for organized criminal groups to develop local embeddedness.

In grassroots China, collective efficacy also depends on whether local institutions are viewed as credible and safe channels for intervention. Residents may be unwilling or unable to intervene when village committees, community leaders, or local representatives are tied to criminal networks, or when intervention creates social and political risks.

In the context of grassroots governance in China, insufficient public participation and weakened community trust may reduce the capacity of residents to resist the infiltration of organized criminal groups into local political and social institutions.

Campaign-Style Governance and State Capacity

Campaign-style governance is not merely periodic enforcement. In China, anti-crime campaigns can reorganize priorities across police, procuratorates, courts, and local governments. Research on the “sweep away black societies and eradicate evil forces” campaign shows that centralized enforcement can intensify early intervention and target identification, but it also creates tension between political mobilization, legal classification, and routine governance capacity (Biddulph, 2015; Liebman, 2014; Minzner, 2011; Trevaskes, 2010; Yin & Mou, 2023). For this study, the relevant question is whether campaign enforcement disrupts already embedded criminal groups without necessarily changing the governance conditions that allowed those groups to persist.

Asian Criminology, Grassroots Embeddedness, and Formal–Informal Social Control

Asian criminology is used in this article as a comparative and theory-building orientation rather than as a claim of cultural exceptionalism. Its value is that it asks how criminological theories developed largely in Western settings can be tested, extended, and reconstructed through Asian institutions, legal categories, social relations, and forms of social control (Liu, 2009, 2017, 2021, 2022; Messner, 2015; Yu & Liu, 2024).

For this article, the main theoretical refinement is descriptive: organized crime in grassroots China should be analyzed in terms of its embeddedness in local social relations and grassroots political structures. This phrasing should not be presented as a new formal theory. It means that criminal groups may persist through kinship, patronage, informal economic ties, village or community authority, political-criminal connections, and uneven routine governance. This approach links social disorganization and collective efficacy to Asian social-control scholarship, which emphasizes the overlap between formal state control, community-level organization, and informal social regulation (Jiang et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2009; Zhong & Zhang, 2021).

This framework also clarifies the role of campaign-style governance. The nationwide anti-gang campaign may reveal and punish organized criminal groups after they have become locally embedded, but the longer-term criminological issue is whether routine governance, public participation, and informal social control can prevent such embeddedness from forming or persisting.

Analytical Framework

Based on the above discussion, this article analyzes grassroots organized crime through four coded governance dimensions and one interpretive lens. The coded dimensions remain: governance capacity; public participation and collective efficacy; social conflict and informal social control; and rapid-response governance mechanisms. The interpretive lens is embeddedness in local social relations and grassroots political structures. This lens links the empirical coding to Asian criminology without requiring a new dataset or a new codebook. It asks whether the judicial cases describe organized criminal groups as operating through local relationships, political access, economic control, and weakened routine governance.

Data and Methodology

Data Source

The study draws on 95 finalized second-instance criminal judgments related to organized crime, “evil force” organizations, and associated criminal groups within a municipal jurisdiction in China during the nationwide anti-gang campaign launched in 2018. The judgments were obtained through China Judgments Online and involved more than 400 defendants and over 900identified victims across the sampled judicial cases.

The data consisted primarily of second-instance criminal judgments issued by intermediate people’s courts between 2018 and 2019. Under China’s two-instance final adjudication system, second-instance judgments were selected because they represent final and legally effective judgments and provide more complete descriptions of criminal organization structures, governance involvement, and associated criminal activities. Compared with many first-instance judgments, second-instance judgments typically contain more comprehensive factual narratives and judicial reasoning, making them particularly suitable for governance-oriented criminological analysis. Judicial documents were collected through China Judgments Online in 2022 using the search terms “gang-related crime,” “evil force,” “organized crime,” and “provoking trouble and disturbance.” The keyword “provoking trouble and disturbance” was included because it frequently appeared as an associated charge within organized crime-related judicial cases during the anti-gang campaign.

The initial search yielded 120 judicial documents. Cases involving duplicate defendants from the same criminal organization, unrelated criminal cases, and non-relevant judgments were excluded through manual screening. The final analytical sample consisted of 95 judicial cases.

Table 1. Case Screening and Sample Selection Process

Screening Stage	Number of Cases
Initial search results	120
Duplicate/related cases removed	20
Irrelevant cases removed	5
Final included judgments	95

Screening Notes:

(1) Duplicate and related cases primarily involved multiple defendants associated with the same criminal organization or repeated judgments from the same criminal case across different procedural stages.

(2) Irrelevant cases referred to criminal judgments that matched the search terms but did not involve organized criminal structures, gang-related activities, or governance-related criminal networks.

Additionally, to preserve geographic anonymity while maintaining analytical clarity, the sampled cases were grouped into 12 jurisdictional units representing the six urban districts and six county-level jurisdictions. These jurisdictional units are identified as Unit 1 through Unit 12 throughout the analysis.

The unit-based classification was used to examine variations in governance characteristics, criminal activities, and organizational persistence across different grassroots governance environments within the municipal jurisdiction.

Specifically, Units 1–6 refer to six urban districts, while Units 7–12 refer to six county-level jurisdictions within the sampled municipality.

Methodological Strategy

This article adopts a qualitative-empirical research design combining:

1. descriptive statistical analysis;

2. thematic analysis of court judgments;

3. criminological analysis of governance mechanisms.

The statistical analysis is used primarily to identify patterns and trends rather than to establish strong causal claims. The coding strategy is therefore described as theory-informed qualitative coding supported by descriptive statistics, rather than as a design for estimating causal effects (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2021). The judicial documents were manually coded according to four analytically derived dimensions informed by criminological theory:

1. governance capacity;

2. public participation and collective efficacy;

3. organizational persistence;

4. governance infiltration and criminal embeddedness.

Most variables employed binary coding schemes (0 = absent; 1 = present) based on observable governance-related indicators explicitly recorded in the judicial documents, including delayed intervention, weak informal social control, political infiltration, and organized criminal persistence.

Repeated governance-related themes and patterns were identified through comparative thematic analysis across the sampled cases. This analytical strategy enables the study to explore how governance deficits are reflected in prosecuted organized crime cases and how criminal organizations appear embedded within local governance structures.

Intercoder Reliability Assessment

To improve methodological transparency and coding reliability, a structured codebook was developed based on criminological theories of governance fragmentation, collective efficacy, and governance infiltration and criminal embeddedness. Approximately 30 cases were independently double-coded by a second trained coder.

Intercoder reliability was assessed using percent agreement and Cohen's kappa (Cohen, 1960; Krippendorff, 2019; Landis & Koch, 1977; Neuendorf, 2017). The use of percent agreement and Cohen's kappa follows recent criminological methodological discussions regarding intercoder reliability assessment and coding consistency (Zeng et al., 2026). Because the coded categories require interpretation of legal narratives, this study reports both agreement and chance-adjusted reliability while recognizing that reliability indices are not interchangeable measures of the same quantity.

Disagreements between coders were reviewed and resolved through consensus discussion based on the predefined coding criteria established in the codebook. The reliability assessment demonstrated substantial agreement across the primary analytical dimensions.

Table 2. Intercoder Reliability Assessment of Judicial Coding Variables

Variable	Coding Type	Double-Coded Cases	Number of Agreements	Percent Agreement	Cohen's kappa
Governance Capacity Deficit	Binary (0/1)	30	28	93.30%	0.81
Weak Collective Efficacy	Binary (0/1)	30	29	96.70%	0.78
Governance Infiltration	Binary (0/1)	30	27	90.00%	0.76
Political Interference	Binary (0/1)	30	29	96.70%	0.84
Violent Activities	Binary (0/1)	30	30	100%	1
Extortion Activities	Binary (0/1)	30	30	100%	1
Organizational Persistence Years	Continuous	30	30	100%	—

Note: Approximately 30 judicial cases were independently double-coded by a second trained coder using a structured codebook developed from criminological theory. Percent agreement and Cohen's kappa were used to assess intercoder reliability for categorical variables. Organizational persistence years were assessed through exact agreement because the variable was coded as a continuous measure based on recorded emergence and prosecution years.

Data Limitations and Selection Bias

The use of court judgments as a data source involves several important limitations. Because this study relies on court judgments and does not use a longitudinal design or causal identification strategy, the findings should be interpreted as associations rather than evidence of causal effects.

First, court judgments represent only detected and prosecuted cases rather than the full population of organized criminal activity. Consequently, the data reflect not only criminal behavior but also patterns of law enforcement, prosecutorial priorities, and judicial processing.

Second, China's anti-gang campaign may have influenced the classification, prosecution, and judicial interpretation of criminal organizations, potentially affecting how cases were categorized as gang-related crimes or "evil force" organizations during the campaign period.

Third, judicial documents provide limited information regarding broader community dynamics, informal governance relationships, and unreported criminal activities. In addition, publication practices and access restrictions associated with China Judgments Online may affect case availability, as some judicial documents may remain publicly accessible only for limited periods before being anonymized, removed, or otherwise unavailable through standard search procedures. Recent work on structuring Macau criminal court judgments shows that court-judgment datasets can be analytically rich, but they also raise problems of data accuracy, publication instability, standardization, and sample selection bias, especially when legal texts are unevenly accessible or difficult to structure consistently (Liu, 2008; Liu et al., 2026).

Consequently, the sampled cases should not be interpreted as representing the complete population of organized criminal activity within the studied jurisdiction.

Because the study relies primarily on judicial documents and does not employ a longitudinal or causal identification design, the findings should be interpreted as identifying governance-related patterns and associations rather than establishing strong causal claims.

Some contextual understanding regarding judicial practices, case-handling procedures, and local governance processes was also informed by broader familiarity with court operations and judicial practice in China.

Despite these limitations, court judgments remain valuable sources for governance-oriented criminological research because they provide relatively detailed information regarding organizational structures, governance infiltration, criminal activities, and interactions between criminal groups and local institutions.

Research Focus

Rather than attempting to estimate the overall prevalence of organized crime, this study examines governance-related patterns reflected in prosecuted judicial cases and explores the apparent relationship between organized criminal groups and local governance structures.

Governance Deficits and the Embeddedness of Organized Crime

Weak Governance Capacity and Legal Authority

Table 3. Changes in the Legal Classification of Organized Crime Cases Before and After Trial

Case Count	Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3	Unit 4	Unit 5	Unit 6	Unit 7	Unit 8	Unit 9	Unit 10	Unit 11	Unit 12	Total	Mean Value	Standard Deviation
Before Trial	7	50	6	6	4	4	4	4	4	3	2	1	95	7.91	13.36
After Trial	7	48	6	6	3	4	4	4	4	2	1	1	90	7.5	12.89
Changes	0	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	-	5	-	-

Note: “Unit 1” to “Unit 12” refer to anonymized jurisdictional governance units within the sampled municipality, including six urban districts and six county-level jurisdictions.

Table3 shows descriptive differences in the identification of gang-related and ‘evil force’ organizations before and after trial proceedings. These discrepancies suggest important variations in legal interpretation and enforcement practices among grassroots institutions.In several cases, investigative authorities appeared to focus primarily on evidence collection for individual criminal charges while paying comparatively less attention to establishing the organizational characteristics required for identifying organized criminal groups. Consequently, some cases categorized as gang-related crimes during investigation were later reclassified during judicial proceedings due to insufficient supporting evidence.

The findings further suggest that campaign-style anti-gang enforcement may be associated with broader or inconsistent categorization practices. In certain cases, criminal groups were classified as organized criminal organizations despite relatively limited evidence concerning organizational structure or social harmfulness. Such practices appear to be associated with administrative and political pressures to demonstrate anti-gang enforcement effectiveness. From a criminological perspective, these inconsistencies reflect broader limitations in governance capacity and institutional coordination. Inconsistent enforcement practices may be associated with weaker governance legitimacy, reduced predictability of formal legal control, and opportunities for organized criminal groups to exploit governance fragmentation. Rather than simply reflecting insufficient legal knowledge among grassroots authorities, the findings suggest possible structural limitations in the coherence and stability of grassroots governance institutions. Viewed in light of the campaign-governance literature, these classification changes may also reflect tension between legal evidence requirements, political mobilization, and the administrative pressure to identify anti-gang targets (Biddulph, 2015; Liebman, 2014; Trevaskes, 2010; Yin & Mou, 2023).

Weak Public Participation and Declining Collective Efficacy

Table 4. Involvement of Grassroots Political Actors in Organized Crime Cases

Item	Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3	Unit 4	Unit 5	Unit 6	Unit 7	Unit 8	Unit 9	Unit 10	Unit 11	Unit 12	Total
Number of “Two Committees” Members Involved	0	1	0	3	1	7	0	0	1	0	0	10	23
Number of People’s Congress Deputies Involved	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	4
Number of Cases Involved	0	1	0	1	1	3	0	0	1	0	0	5	12
Members Seizing Control of Grassroots Political Power	0	1	0	1	0	3	0	0	1	0	0	4	10

Note: “Unit 1” to “Unit 12” refer to anonymized jurisdictional governance units within the sampled municipality, including six urban districts and six county-level jurisdictions.

The evidence further suggests an association between weakened collective efficacy and the persistence of organized criminal activity. Where residents became excluded from governance participation or lost confidence in institutional legitimacy, informal social control mechanisms became increasingly ineffective. Under these conditions, organized criminal groups were able to expand their influence within local communities and consolidate informal authority over social and economic resources.

The findings also reveal institutional weaknesses in local governance oversight mechanisms. In some cases, the judgments describe cases in which individuals with prior criminal involvement obtained positions within local political institutions despite apparent deficiencies in candidate review procedures and grassroots supervision. These patterns suggest broader governance fragmentation rather than isolated cases of individual corruption.

From an Asian criminology perspective, the involvement of grassroots political actors should not be treated solely as individual corruption. It also shows how criminal authority may travel through local social relations, village or community offices, and informal access to public resources. This pattern is consistent with research on the political-criminal nexus and extra-legal protection in China, where organized crime may become durable by attaching itself to low-level authority and local economic interests (Chin & Godson, 2006; Wang, 2017).

Table 5. Types of Organized Criminal Activities in Grassroots Communities

Category	Category	Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3	Unit 4	Unit 5	Unit 6	Unit 7	Unit 8	Unit 9	Unit 10	Unit 11	Unit 12	Proportion of Cases (%)
Violent and Coercive Activities	Violent and Coercive Activities	Violent and Coercive Activities	Violent and Coercive Activities	Violent and Coercive Activities	Violent and Coercive Activities	Violent and Coercive Activities	Violent and Coercive Activities	Violent and Coercive Activities	Violent and Coercive Activities	Violent and Coercive Activities	Violent and Coercive Activities	Violent and Coercive Activities	Violent and Coercive Activities	Violent and Coercive Activities
Collective Violent Conflict	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	1	0	2	6.32
Violent Disorder	4	4	2	4	1	3	2	0	1	0	2	2	33	56.84
Extortion	0	0	1	1	1	0	4	0	0	1	1	1	17	28.42
Unlawful Detention	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	7	9.47
Property Destruction	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1.05
Economically Motivated Criminal Activities	Economically Motivated Criminal Activities	Economically Motivated Criminal Activities	Economically Motivated Criminal Activities	Economically Motivated Criminal Activities	Economically Motivated Criminal Activities	Economically Motivated Criminal Activities	Economically Motivated Criminal Activities	Economically Motivated Criminal Activities	Economically Motivated Criminal Activities	Economically Motivated Criminal Activities	Economically Motivated Criminal Activities	Economically Motivated Criminal Activities	Economically Motivated Criminal Activities	Economically Motivated Criminal Activities
Coercive Commercial Activities	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	1	1	2	7	13.68
Illegal Gambling Operations	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	5	8.42
Criminal Market Monopolization (Note 2)	2	2	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	6	11.58

Category	Category	Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3	Unit 4	Unit 5	Unit 6	Unit 7	Unit 8	Unit 9	Unit 10	Unit 11	Unit 12	Proportion of Cases (%)
Predatory Lending and Violent Debt Collection	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	6	9.47
Vehicle-Related Extortion	2	2	0	2	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	2	17	26.32
Governance-Related Criminal Activities	Governance-Related Criminal Activities	Governance-Related Criminal Activities	Governance-Related Criminal Activities	Governance-Related Criminal Activities	Governance-Related Criminal Activities	Governance-Related Criminal Activities	Governance-Related Criminal Activities	Governance-Related Criminal Activities	Governance-Related Criminal Activities	Governance-Related Criminal Activities	Governance-Related Criminal Activities	Governance-Related Criminal Activities	Governance-Related Criminal Activities	Governance-Related Criminal Activities
Political Interference in Local Governance (Note 1)	Political Interference in Local Governance (Note 1)	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	2	5.26
Other Criminal Activities	Other Criminal Activities	Other Criminal Activities	Other Criminal Activities	Other Criminal Activities	Other Criminal Activities	Other Criminal Activities	Other Criminal Activities	Other Criminal Activities	Other Criminal Activities	Other Criminal Activities	Other Criminal Activities	Other Criminal Activities	Other Criminal Activities	Other Criminal Activities
Organized Sexual Exploitation	Organized Sexual Exploitation	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	3	6.32
Others	Others	2	0	0	0	1	0	3	0	0	1	0	6	13.68

Notes:

(1) “Unit 1” to “Unit 12” refer to anonymized jurisdictional governance units within the sampled municipality, including six urban districts and six county-level jurisdictions.

(2) This category refers to organized criminal groups involved in interference with local elections and informal control over grassroots governance institutions.

(3) Criminal market monopolization refers to organized criminal activities involving coercive control over industries or markets through violence, intimidation, or illegal protection arrangements.

(4) Percentages were calculated based on the total sample of 95 judicial cases. Because multiple criminal activities or governance-related characteristics could appear within the same case, cumulative percentages may exceed 100%.

The distribution of criminal activities presented in Table5 demonstrates that grassroots organized crime was closely connected to local social conflict, competition over economic resources, and weakened informal social regulation. Because multiple criminal activities may occur within a single case, the cumulative proportions exceed 100%. Violent and coercive activities constituted a substantial proportion of the sample. Violent disorder accounted for 56.84% of cases, extortion accounted for 28.42%, and vehicle-related extortion accounted for 26.32%. These findings suggest that violence, intimidation, and coercive authority were frequently recorded in cases where organized criminal groups had local influence.

Economically motivated criminal activities also represented a substantial proportion of the sample. Coercive commercial activities, criminal market monopolization, and predatory lending collectively reflected competition over local economic resources and informal economic control. These patterns indicate that organized criminal groups were often embedded within local economic networks rather than operating entirely outside community structures. In addition, governance-related criminal activities—including political interference in local governance institutions—demonstrated the close relationship between organized crime and grassroots political authority. In several cases, criminal organizations attempted to influence local governance processes, resource allocation, and community decision-making through informal coercive mechanisms.

From a criminological perspective, these findings are consistent with theories emphasizing governance fragmentation, weakened collective efficacy, and ineffective informal social control. The Asian criminology contribution is to specify how these mechanisms appear in the Chinese grassroots setting. Violence, extortion, market monopolization, and political interference are not separate phenomena in the judgments. Together, they

suggest an overlap between informal coercion, local economic competition, and weak formal regulation. This interpretation is consistent with Asian social-control scholarship that stresses the interaction of formal and informal control rather than treating them as separate systems (Jiang et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2009; Zhong & Zhang, 2021).

Organizational Persistence and the Limitations of Campaign Governance

Table 6. Emergence and Prosecution of Organized Criminal Groups by Year

Year	1999	2004	2005	2006	2007	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Emergence of Criminal Groups	1	1	1	1	2	0	1	5	2	3	3	12	19	32	7
Criminal Groups Prosecuted	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	2	3	8	25	55

Note: “Emergence” refers to the earliest year of organized criminal activity recorded in the judicial documents. “Prosecution” refers to the year in which the criminal case entered formal judicial proceedings or adjudication according to the judicial records. Only years explicitly identified in the sampled judicial documents are reported in the table. The interval between emergence and prosecution was used descriptively to examine possible patterns of delayed intervention rather than to establish causal relationships.

Table 7. Duration and Persistence of Organized Criminal Groups Across Grassroots Jurisdictions

Item	Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3	Unit 4	Unit 5	Unit 6	Unit 7	Unit 8	Unit 9	Unit 10	Unit 11	Unit 12
Number of Criminal Incidents	52	9	125	5	74	41	21	36	68	13	64	961
Minimum Duration (Years)	0	0	0	5	1	0	1	1	2	0	1	0
Maximum Duration (Years)	1	1	7	5	1	3	6	3	4	6	3	19
Mean Duration (Years)	0.71	0.75	2.33	5	1	1.17	3.25	2	2.67	2.25	2.25	2.72
SD	0.18	0.25	1.02	0	0	0.48	1.11	1	0.67	1.44	0.48	0.54

Notes:

(1) “Unit 1” to “Unit 12” refer to anonymized jurisdictional governance units within the sampled municipality, including six urban districts and six county-level jurisdictions.

(2) “Duration” refers to the interval between the earliest recorded organized criminal activity and the corresponding prosecution or adjudication period described in the judicial documents.

“Number of Criminal Incidents” refers to the total number of criminal incidents or organized criminal activities identified within the sampled judicial cases for each jurisdictional unit.

Mean duration values were calculated based on the sampled judicial cases associated with each jurisdictional unit.

Tables 6 and 7show the long-term persistence of organized criminal groups within grassroots communities prior to formal intervention. The judgments indicated that many criminal organizations had allegedly operated for extended periods before prosecution occurred, with some groups remaining active for more than a decade.

Table7 further shows considerable variation in the duration and persistence of organized criminal groups across grassroots jurisdictions. Several organizations remained active for multiple years, and longer organizational

persistence was frequently associated with a higher number of criminal incidents. Some cases reported a duration value of zero because the emergence of organized criminal activity and the corresponding prosecution or adjudication occurred within the same recorded year. In particular, Unit 12 reported a comparatively high number of criminal incidents and longer organizational persistence periods relative to several other grassroots jurisdictions. These patterns may be associated with comparatively rapid economic development, demolition and reconstruction projects, and increased opportunities for resource competition and informal governance interactions within the local jurisdiction. They suggest that longer organizational persistence was associated with greater apparent capacity to consolidate informal authority, monopolize local resources, and influence local governance processes.

From a criminological perspective, the prolonged persistence of organized criminal groups reflects weaknesses in routine governance capacity, early-warning systems, and sustained informal social control. The timing of prosecution suggests possible delays or gaps in the identification of emerging criminal networks.

The findings also highlight the limits of interpreting campaign enforcement as routine prevention. The tables do not prove that campaign-style governance caused delayed intervention. They show that many prosecuted groups had already persisted for some time before large-scale enforcement intensified. This pattern is consistent with the view that campaigns may reveal and punish embedded criminal groups after they have become visible to higher-level enforcement systems, while routine governance still needs stable institutional coordination, public participation, and informal social regulation to prevent local embeddedness from developing.

Taken together, the findings do not suggest that social disorganization or collective efficacy theories are unsuitable for China. They suggest that these theories require contextual specification. In the sampled judgments, grassroots organized crime appears associated not only with weakened informal social control, but also with local political access, relational ties, campaign-style enforcement, and the overlap between formal and informal mechanisms of social control. This is where the article’s contribution to Asian criminology is located.

The findings of this study demonstrate that grassroots organized crime in China is closely associated with governance fragmentation and weakened institutional coordination. Rather than functioning solely as external criminal actors, organized criminal groups frequently became embedded within local governance structures through kinship networks, informal political relationships, and economic influence.

The empirical findings suggest that inconsistent legal enforcement, weak governance legitimacy, and ineffective response mechanisms may have been associated with opportunities for criminal organizations to consolidate informal authority within local communities. These patterns are consistent with criminological literature emphasizing the embedded relationship between organized crime and local governance structures.

The study therefore suggests that organized crime should not be understood merely as a criminal justice problem. It should also be viewed as a governance problem in which criminal groups may become embedded in local social relations and grassroots political structures when institutional capacity, public participation, and informal regulation weaken at the same time.

The data are consistent with collective efficacy theory and broader criminological arguments concerning informal social control.

In multiple cases, organized criminal groups became connected to grassroots political institutions and local economic networks. Under such conditions, residents’ trust in governance institutions gradually weakened, and opportunities for meaningful public participation became increasingly limited.

The cases are consistent with the possibility that weakened collective efficacy was associated with reduced informal regulation and lower resistance to criminal infiltration. As informal social control declined, organized criminal groups became increasingly capable of exercising coercive authority over local social relations and economic activities.

These findings suggest that long-term organized-crime prevention depends not only on community participation in general, but also on the credibility and safety of the local institutions through which residents are expected to participate.

The findings also reveal important limitations of campaign-style governance.

Although the nationwide anti-gang campaign generated substantial short-term prosecution outcomes, many organized criminal groups had already persisted for extended periods before intervention occurred. In several cases, criminal organizations remained active for years while gradually consolidating local influence.

In the sample cases, campaign governance appears to have operated largely after criminal organizations had already persisted for some time. While periodic enforcement campaigns may temporarily disrupt criminal organizations, they do not necessarily resolve the structural governance conditions facilitating criminal persistence and embeddedness.

From the perspective of governance-oriented criminology, campaign enforcement can expose and punish criminal embeddedness, but it is unlikely to substitute for routine prevention. Sustainable prevention requires routine institutional coordination, credible grassroots oversight, public participation, and informal social regulation that operates before criminal groups consolidate local authority.

The comparative implication of this study is not that China is exceptional or that Western criminological theories should be rejected. The findings instead support a more limited and useful claim: theories of social disorganization, collective efficacy, and criminal governance need institutional specification when applied to Chinese grassroots governance. Asian criminology provides the framework for making that specification because it asks how general theories travel across legal systems, social relations, and modes of social control (Liu, 2009, 2017, 2021, 2022; Messner, 2015; Yu & Liu, 2024).

In this study, the key specification concerns embeddedness. The sampled judgments suggest that organized criminal groups were not only located in socially disorganized communities. They were also, in some cases, connected to village or community authority, local economic resources, kinship and patronage ties, and uneven routine governance. This does not require treating “relational-political embeddedness” as a new named theory. A safer formulation is that organized crime may become embedded in local social relations and grassroots political structures.

This formulation also clarifies the article’s contribution to criminal governance research. In many Western accounts, criminal governance is discussed through protection, extra-legal authority, or mafia-like territorial control. The Chinese cases examined here suggest a related but institutionally specific pattern: criminal authority may persist where formal grassroots institutions, informal community regulation, and local political access overlap. This is why the findings matter for Asian criminology as well as for organized-crime research.

This study examined the relationship between grassroots governance deficits and organized crime in China through the analysis of court judgments related to gang-related crime and organized criminal groups.

The research findings suggest that organized crime at the grassroots level is closely associated with governance fragmentation, weakened collective efficacy, limited public participation, and ineffective informal social control. Rather than functioning solely as isolated criminal actors, organized criminal groups frequently became embedded within local political, social, and economic structures.

The study further suggests that campaign-style anti-gang governance may produce substantial short-term enforcement outcomes while failing to establish sustainable long-term governance mechanisms capable of preventing organizational persistence and criminal embeddedness.

From a criminological perspective, the findings are consistent with theories emphasizing the importance of social disorganization, governance legitimacy, and informal social regulation in shaping patterns of organized crime. The persistence of organized criminal groups across multiple grassroots jurisdictions indicates that long-term crime prevention depends not only on enforcement intensity but also on stable governance capacity, institutional coordination, and sustained community participation.

This study also contributes to Asian and comparative criminology by showing how theories developed largely in Western settings can be specified through Chinese grassroots governance. The findings suggest that social disorganization and collective efficacy remain useful, but they require attention to local political authority, relational ties, campaign-style enforcement, and the overlap between formal and informal social control. The article's contribution is therefore not a new universal theory of organized crime, but a more context-sensitive account of how criminal embeddedness appears in prosecuted grassroots cases in China.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. Because the study relies primarily on court judgments, the findings reflect detected and prosecuted cases rather than the total prevalence of organized crime. Future research may further explore the relationship between governance transformation, criminal embeddedness, and informal social control through comparative, longitudinal, ethnographic, and structured legal-text research designs. If computational tools are used to expand judicial-document datasets, researchers should address data accuracy, sample selection, interpretability, and responsible prediction in high-stakes criminal-justice settings (Liu & Li, 2024; Liu et al., 2026; Neuendorf, 2017; Saldaña, 2021; Zeng et al., 2026). Overall, the findings suggest that sustainable governance of organized crime requires not only periodic enforcement campaigns but also stronger governance legitimacy, more effective institutional coordination, and greater capacity for informal social regulation within grassroots communities.

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